

FLACCID HUMPS, AN IMP, AND PRECIOUS DIAMONDS: MTSHO LHO CHILDHOOD MEMORIES 1995-2010

Skal bzang tshe brtan སྐལ་བཟང་ཚེ་བརྟན། (Independent Scholar)

I was born in 1995 in Chu ring (Qurang) Village¹ Thang dkar ma (Tanggemu) Town, Gser chen (Gonghe) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China. Due to my previous life in which I did many charitable acts I was reborn as a human being. There is a local saying emphasizing the preciousness of a human life:

Dal 'byor gyi mi lus rin po che 'di len pa ni spar gang gi sran ma de gyang ngos la gtor rjes de gyang dngos nas bsdod pas go skabs ni phran bu tsam yin pa ci bzhin no.

The chance of obtaining a human life is comparable to that of a single soybean sticking to a wall among a handful of soybeans thrown at the wall.

Many locals believe that a human life is more precious than a diamond because it provides an opportunity to prostrate to and circumambulate sacred mountains and temples, chant mantras, meditate in seclusion, and aid others, all resulting in the accumulation of merits. They believe that this will eventually lead to enlightenment - freedom from the cycle of mindless existence.

My parents told me that when I was a little child I often murmured that I was the reincarnation of Baobei. From Grandfather (Mchog rus, b. 1942), I learned that Baobei was a Chinese landowner's child.

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¹ I use "village" in line with the official Chinese administrative designation *cun* 'village'.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the government declared that all landowners' descendants should be punished and encouraged the idea that true proletarian dictatorship should flow from those who had been at the bottom of the old society.

Consequently, Baobei was imprisoned in Thang dkar ma. Grandfather said that Baobei was a good man with a kind heart who generously treated those who worked for him and others struggling in poverty.

Baobei went mad during his imprisonment because of persecution and bad conditions. He was allowed to wander around the prison with dirtied trousers because the guards paid little attention to insane prisoners.

I had many questions as I grew older and was able to talk to my parents. I asked Father (Snying thar rgyal, b. 1962) countless questions. When I asked, "At the time of death, a human must meet the terrible Gshin rje chos rgyal 'God of Death', but where does Gshin rje chos rgyal go when he dies?" Father only tittered in reply.

One foggy summer day, we moved to our summer pasture and pitched a big triangular white tent. Mother (Lha mo rgya b. 1967) milked cows in the early morning, piled up cow dung, and then prepared food for the three of us. While we were enjoying breakfast, Father was the commander, assigning tasks for the day. Mother was to stay at home and do chores, while Father and I would take the cattle and sheep to the grassland.

Father then went to bring a camel for me to ride because the grassland was far away. I was a small child - as short as a *mi la tsi tsi*, which I was afraid of, especially after one of my aunts told me this story:

Long ago, a young couple and their five-year-old son lived in a rural community. The boy's father herded during the day while the mother busily collected cow dung, fetched water, and went to the mountain where she gathered herbs that she took to a market to trade for salt, sugar, flour, tea, and other necessities. When the parents were away from the home, they tied their little boy to a post so he would be safe and not wander off.

One day the couple tied their son to a post and left as usual. At first, the little boy cried, but he quickly forgot his discomfort and played with this and that.

Suddenly what seemed to be an ordinary child with a pale, oval face dressed in a black robe appeared. The little boy was astonished since he had not noticed the arrival of this black-robed child.

"If you come with me, I'll give you candies, toys, and whatever you want," the *mi la tsi tsi* said.

"If you untie my sash from the post, we can play," the little boy replied

The *mi la tsi tsi* saw that the rope was tied and knotted on the post high out of his reach so he used his magic to loosen the rope from both the boy's waist and post. Then he took the boy to his home, which was in a cave. The *mi la tsi tsi* offered a handful of sand that, to the boy, was a handful of sugar and was the tastiest he had ever had. Then the *mi la tsi tsi* offered several animal-shaped stones that appeared to the boy as delightful toys.

Time passed quickly as they played together. When it was almost time for his parents to return home, the *mi la tsi tsi* took the little boy back to his home in the twinkling of an eye, tied him to the post, and said he would see the boy the next day and left.

The little boy knew that if he revealed the truth to his parents, they would stop him playing with the *mi la tsi tsi*. In his childish mind, the *mi la tsi tsi* was just a little boy who also wanted to play and enjoy sugar.

The next day when the boy's parents left, the *mi la tsi tsi* came, untied the rope, and they went to the cave for many fun activities. After the *mi la tsi tsi* took the little boy home, his mother, noticing some sand on his lips, asked why he was eating sand.

"Mother, it's sugar," declared the little boy.

"Where did you get it?" his mother asked.

"I got it from..." he stammered, looked at the ground, and fell silent. While they were eating, the boy found his tongue and described his adventure with the pale-faced boy.

His parents were suspicious. The anxious father went to see his own father. After listening to this account, the boy's grandfather said the

pale-faced boy was a *mi la tsi tsi* and would eventually take his grandson and not return him.

Afterwards, the boy's parents carefully supervised their son.

I thus thought *mi la tsi tsi* were very dangerous because of this and other stories told by elders to remind children not to go places alone. Once in the clutches of a *mi la tsi tsi*, a child would not feel hungry and would play until they starved to death. When I went outside at night, I was afraid of *mi la tsi tsi*, whom I believed had all sorts of magic powers.

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I was surprised when Father returned with a camel, pulled the *sna thig* 'nose rope', said, "*Tshugs*," and the camel knelt.

I mounted the camel, Father pulled the nose rope and said, "*Shugs*," and the camel stood.

The camel was more than two meters tall at the shoulders and was covered with wooly, sandy hair. To my eyes, the camel strongly resembled a tea pot.

At first I was a little scared because I had never ridden a camel before. Two humps like Mount Gangs te se (Kailash) and Mount Jo mo glang ma (Everest) faced each other. Father explained that to avoid a beating from the flaccid humps, an inexperienced rider should not make a camel run, as it might cause injury.

When I asked Father why we have camels when many other Tibetans do not, he said he did not know. However, he told me this story about a camel:

Long ago some of our ancestors went into Mongolian territory and after stealing two little boys, they began to return to our home area. On the way back, one little boy periodically fed salt to the camel he was riding. Because it had been fed salt the camel ran so fast that even though our ancestors pursued it, they could not catch it. About halfway to our home area, this little boy rode back to his own home on the camel.

The other little boy was brought back to our home area, grew up, married a local woman, and had many descendants.

After a bit, we reached our fenced pasture and Father again said, "*Tshugs*." The camel knelt obediently.

I ran to Father, curiously looked at the camel, and inquired, "We already have cattle. They are better than camels because they can transport our belongings and we can eat their flesh, so why do we need a camel?"

Father explained that because the camel embodies the twelve zodiac animals Tibetans do not generally eat camel meat. He added that if a pregnant woman rode a camel, the period of her pregnancy would increase by three months, which explains why local pregnant women do not ride camels.

Historically, locals crossed the mountains with several camels to fetch salt. Once, a camel died near our local territory. Afterwards, the area where the camel had died began to produce salt and then people no longer needed to go far away to obtain salt.

I practiced giving the camel commands and riding it. While Father sat cross-legged, patiently watching me and the livestock from a distance, the obedient camel followed my commands.

As dusk approached, Father waved, indicating I should round up the cattle and sheep. I did so, and then with rumbling stomachs, we set off for home. When we arrived, Mother offered us bowls of noodles cooked in mutton soup. I attacked the food voraciously. Mother, who sat to the right of the adobe stove, gently suggested that I eat slowly, worrying that I might choke on chunks of meat in the noodles.

Meanwhile, Father made some jokes, creating an even more pleasant atmosphere. After dinner, we slept on a big rectangular bed that Father had made from pieces of sod, which he had then covered with carpets. As usual I slept in the middle and, to the rhythm of water boiling in a kettle left on the stove heated by cow dung, I began dreaming.

The next morning, I woke up and found myself alone in a corner of the tent. It was very cold. Frigid winds pierced my bones, struck my heart, and then bounced away. Mother stopped milking. Almost every sentient being that could hibernate had done so.

One bitterly cold day, Mother got up first as usual, put on her winter robe, went to the cow dung shed, and brought back dried dung to make a fire. After the fire was bright and hot, she boiled milk tea. The sound of the bubbling tea made me even more sleepy and comfortable. Father's call brought me out of bed. I pulled on my brown winter robe and tied the sash. I was glad that I still wore a robe, though local children often wore fashionable overcoats.

After a meal of milk tea with Mother's homemade bread, Father and I covered the bread with a plastic bag and filled two plastic bottles with cow-milk tea. We put this food in a *ta len* 'saddlebag' which sat on the camel.

It was a very tough job to herd in cold weather, especially for a little boy. While Father preferred to walk among the grazing livestock, I did not. If there was nothing for me to ride, I was very reluctant to herd, even if Mother beat me.

One sunny day, when Father went to the county town to sell several sheepskins and to purchase some necessities, Mother yelled at me to tend the sheep and cattle with one of my elder cousins. As there was no horse or camel for me to ride, I refused. Mother began beating me like an anti-Japanese war hero.¹ She showed no mercy. Finally, I mounted a bull in our cattle enclosure and drove all the livestock to our pasture.

The bull moved as slowly as a snail creeping on a tree branch. I was in a bad mood from Mother's beating and did not speak to my elder cousin until we reached the pasture, where I promptly forgot my unhappiness. Then, Cousin and I grabbed each other's sashes and began wrestling, trying to throw each other onto the ground. Cousin knew that I had many strategies so he pushed me with one hand, using all his strength. None of my peers could defeat me in wrestling, including Cousin, who was two years older than me, and this time was no exception.

¹ In China, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) is often termed the Eight Year War of Anti-Japanese Resistance. It began in 1937 and ended in 1945 with Japan's surrender (goo.gl/DrDWjN, accessed 24 August 2016).

Three hours passed and soon the sun was setting. Using binoculars, we saw Father returning on his stallion, riding to where we were herding. He had come to help us round up the livestock. Thinking we looked a bit gloomy, he gave us a bunch of candy. Munching and sucking contentedly on this candy we then happily drove the livestock home.

During supper, I asked Father why Uncle Rta b+he's bull camel had attacked a man a few days before. Father explained that bull camels attack people during winter, because it is their courtship season. Father also added that camels can live without water for more than one month in summer, and generally defecate once every two weeks at which time the dung can fill a large plastic sack. In winter, a camel only needs to eat once in two weeks at most.

I was proud of Father for seemingly knowing everything. I remain proud of Father who cares about others regardless of their ethnicity, and helps others enthusiastically and benevolently. I hope Father maintains this caring attitude for as long as the Yar klung River flows.

Seven different relatives occasionally borrowed our camel to move their tent and other belongings from pasture to pasture, campsite to campsite. Once, when the Bdud b+he family returned our camel, I noticed that it was not eating well. When we gave it water in a *lcags gzhong* 'metal trough', Mother complained that those who had borrowed it had forced it to carry very heavy loads. After that, we ensured that our camel did no heavy work for some days to let it rest and recover.

In about 2006, motorcycles and jeeps began appearing in the local area. In no time, everyone was busy selling their horses, sheep, goats, donkeys, and cattle. Some households also sold their camels. My family was very fond of our camel, but Father also eventually sold it and a few head of cattle in order to buy a motorcycle. A man wearing a white skullcap, black suit, and brown leather shoes came to our home. From a distance, I saw Father and the white-capped man making a deal. Since birth, my relatives had warned me to avoid white-capped men, so I felt uncomfortable. Finally, the outsider rode the camel from our

pasture down a narrow dirt road. The camel seemed to be reluctant to leave the land of his birth where he had spent his life.

As I gazed at the camel leaving and realized it would never return, I felt a sorrow that I had never experienced before. Tears flowed from my eyes. I escaped Mother and Father's notice and went back home, where I stopped crying. "A bloody death on the battlefield is better than a man crying," Father had often said.

Historically, a household with a camel suggests that this family is endowed with *kha rje* 'good fortune', *dbang thang* 'karmic power', and more *rlung rta* 'positive personal energy'/'wind horse'.

I want to explain the idea of 'positive personal energy' as local people understand it. Locals frequently comment on one's *rlung rta*. For instance, in 2015, Bla ma Khams btsan po ma (b. 1986) predicted that my family's *rlung rta* was unfavorable. How true! Father broke his leg in a car accident. To make things worse, a truck accidentally crashed into a flock of our sheep, killing ten. We eventually accepted that the driver was unable to compensate us fully, and agreed to take compensation for five sheep. And the last straw was that year when our horses that regularly won the races we competed in won nothing.

Father told me this story:

Bstan 'dzin and his family members set out on a pilgrimage to Lha sa with horses to ride, camels to carry their belongings, and some sheep for food. They encountered terrible weather while crossing Mya ngam thang/Hoh Xil. At first, they endured fiercely hot weather. Concerned that the water they had brought was inadequate to satisfy themselves and their livestock, they were relieved to remember the camels did not require water. Calamity was averted.

Later on a bitterly cold day when they reached the snow-capped Mount A chen gangs, their horses and sheep found it very difficult to walk and some died, but the camels continued walking and crossed the mountain successfully.

A month later, they reached their destination. Stories of this successful pilgrimage further supported locals' belief in the usefulness of camels.

Rnam rgyal (b. ~1968) of Kun dga' Village had watered his livestock and was returning home with this camel carrying water stored in a tire inner tube (2016, Rnam rgyal).



In 2016 Mother's cousin, Tshul khrims (b. ~1980), herded for a Mongol family in the Tsha kha Lake¹ area. Uncle Tshul khrims rode a camel as he moved from his autumn camp to his winter home with his family members (2015, Mtsho mo).



¹ Located in Ulan County, Mtsho nub (Haixi) Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

Uncle Tshul khrims and his wife, Mtsho mo (b. ~1985), moved from their autumn camp to their winter home. On foot, this trip took one day (2016, Mtsho mo).



Uncle Tshul khrim's camels en route from the autumn camp to their winter house (2016, Tshul khrim).



Uncle Tshul khrim's camels grazing (2016, Tshul khrim's).



Mother told me a camel could carry 1,000 *rgya ma* (500 kilograms). The image below is of a *sna thur* 'nose peg' made by Father. The left part of the peg is the *sna stong* 'nose fletching'. It is thought to help prevent the camel from feeling dizzy when carrying heavy loads up slopes. The nose peg also features two *sna ljibs* 'nose pads'. A dizzy camel might fall to the ground and locals believe that the red color of the nose pads helps lessen the camel's sense of dizziness (2016, Skal bzang tshe brtan).



Our winter home, pictured below, was built in about 1986. Such homes are called *sa 'gul khang ba* 'earthquake-resistant houses' (2015, Skal bzang tshe brtan). A sheep enclosure is in the background. In about 2008, the government and our family jointly paid for a house located in Ru chen gsum pa, a settlement that consisted of two Han communities, one Tibetan community, and a Hui 'Chinese Muslim' community. By 2016, good roads, a few shops, and wi-fi accessibility made living in Ru chen gsum pa attractive. In addition, our family had 0.37 hectares of fields on which we cultivated barley that generally yielded a total of about 3,000 *rgya ma* (1,500 kilograms) per year.



Our summer camp near Mtsho sngon po 'Qinghai Lake' (2016, Skal bzang tshe brtan).



NON-ENGLISH TERMS

a chen gangs ri ཨ་ཆེན་གངས་རི།

Baobei 宝贝

bdud b+he བདུད་བླ།

bla ma khams btsan po ma ལྷ་མ་ཁམས་བཙན་པོ་མ།

bstan 'dzin བསྟན་འཛིན།

chu ring རྩུ་རིང་།

cun 村

dal 'byor gyi mi lus rin po che 'di len pa ni spar gang gi sran ma de
gyang ngos la gtor rjes de gyang ngos nas sdod pa'i go skabs ni
phran bu tsam yin pa ji bzhin no དལ་འབྱོར་གྱི་མི་ལུས་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་འདི་ལེན་པ་ནི་
སྤར་གང་གི་སྤན་མ་དེ་གྲང་ངོས་ལ་གཏོར་རྗེས་དེ་གྲང་དངོས་ནས་སྤྲོད་པའི་གོ་སྐབས་ནི་ཕན་བྱ་ཙམ་
ཡིན་པ་ཇི་བཞིན་ནོ།

dal 'byor gyi mi lus rin po che 'di len pa ni spar gang gi sran ma de
gyang ngos la gtor rjes de gyang dngos nas bsdod pas go skabs
ni phran bu tsam yin pa ci bzhin no དལ་འབྱོར་གྱི་མི་ལུས་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་འདི་ལེན་
པ་ནི་སྤར་གང་གི་སྤན་མ་དེ་གྲང་ངོས་ལ་གཏོར་རྗེས་དེ་གྲང་དངོས་ནས་སྤྲོད་པས་གོ་སྐབས་ནི་ཕན་བྱ་
ཙམ་ཡིན་པ་ཅི་བཞིན་ནོ།

dbang thang དབང་ཐང་།

gangs te se གངས་རྟེ་ཤེ།

gshin rje chos rgyal གཤིན་རྗེ་ཆོས་རྒྱལ།

Han 汉

Haixi 海西

Hui 回

jo mo glang ma ཇོ་མོ་གླང་མ།

kha rje ཁ་རྗེ།

kun dga' ཀུན་དགལ།

lcags gzhong ལུགས་གཞོང་།

lha mo rgyal ལྷ་མོ་རྒྱ།

Lhasa, lha sa ལྷ་ས།

mchog rus མཆོག་རུས།

mi la tsi tsi མི་ལ་ཙི་ཙི།

mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།

mtsho nub མཚོ་ནུབ།

mtsho sngon po མཚོ་སྒོན་པོ།
 mya ngam thang མྱ་ངམ་ཐང་།
 Qinghai 青海
 rgya ma རྒྱ་མ།
 rlung rta རྩུང་རྩ།
 rnam rgyal རྩམ་རྒྱལ།
 rta b+he རྩ་ཐེ།
 ru chen gsum pa རུ་ཆེན་གསུམ་པ།
 sa 'gul khang ba ས་འགུལ་ཁང་བ།
 shugs ཤུགས།
 skal bzang tshe brtan སྐལ་བཟང་ཆེ་བརྟན།
 sna ljibs སྤྱ་ལྗེས།
 sna stong སྤྱ་སྟོང་།
 sna thig སྤྱ་ཐིག།
 sna thur སྤྱ་ཐུར།
 sning thar rgyal སྤྱིང་ཐར་རྒྱལ།
 ta len ཏ་ལེན།
 tshugs རྩུགས།
 tshul khrims རྩུལ་ཁྲིམས།
 Ulan 乌兰
 yar klung ཡར་ཀླུང་།